

What is Advaita Vedanta? – Advaita For Dummies

You may have already heard that advaita talks about oneness, the oneness of the existence that exists without a second; it says that this oneness is your true nature! But this is not a theory and not something that is meant to be just intellectually understood. This oneness is realized in one's living experience which not only transforms you but also liberates you from all psychological bondages.

I will give you a short introduction on Advaita Vedanta but will also let you know about some pitfalls that one can encounter if certain things are not understood. Before Advaita Vedanta is taught, the disciple is expected to develop four-fold qualifications called sadhana chatustaya. I will also quickly go over them in this post.



Adhi Shankara

First, advaita (non-duality) doesn't really have a contradiction with dvaita (duality). And there was a reason why various dvaita (dual) schools emerged after Shankara's time. What is usually described as advaita philosophy or the non-dual oneness is the fruit of the spiritual path. What is described as dvaita philosophy (the duality of God and devotee) is actually a path. In the beginning of bhakti, there is duality; but it always ends with non-dual oneness.

In Advaita Vedanta, bhakti or devotion is considered as one of the means to purify oneself and develop sadhana chatustaya or four-fold qualifications. But the problem with Advaita Vedanta is usually this: people directly go for the theory or the higher teachings in Vedanta without developing these four-fold qualifications. It is developing the four-fold qualifications that takes the most part of a person's journey.

This mere intellectual understanding sometimes results in pure arrogance with absolutely no transformation. When you tell someone that sounds like "You are God", it is very likely that it will be misunderstood; the person may also forget his duties and become very careless; because from the perspective of Advaita, nothing really matters. But in practical life; everything matters. Even after realizing the truth in your experience, you still have to play the role in the real world. You would certainly live like a water drop on a lotus leaf, but the world still sees you as an individual bound to the obligations of the society.

Advaita and Dvaita

People like Ramanuja and Madhva who came after Shankara addressed the above mentioned problem. If you see the traditions in the world which see God and devotee as separate, you will notice that they all promise a place after death where they can live in God's presence. We often hear vivid descriptions of vaikunta, paradise or heaven. This was just used as a trick or a social tool. To the general public, it was this teaching which was appropriate: develop loving devotion to God and surrender to him; after

death, you can live with him forever. This was like tricking a child. By saying this, they can lure them into showing devotion. This in turn purifies the mind. According to the tradition, even if liberation is not possible for a person in this life, the spiritual development that he went through is carried forward to the next birth.

There have been many places in the world where people were quite primitive and completely lacked any moral sense or obligation towards society. Just imagine a vast peninsula which has no empire, no state, no kings and no public laws. 5th century Saudi Arabia is one of them. Many people, as a reaction to how things have turned out in the name of Islam and how [Muhammad](#)'s life was described in Hadiths written down many decades after his death, have come to a conclusion that Muhammad was a power hungry warlord, who was just after power, women and sex. But that will contradict many things in Islam itself.

Even the critics of Muhammad agree that Muhammad was a genius. Also, historians suggest that he was not illiterate as it is believed by Muslims. Muhammad also played tricks; he made compromises too. [The idea of eternal hell was actually a social tool developed by Plato, a disciple of Socrates](#); it is not there in old Testament of Bible. Muhammad used this concept to discipline the people of Arabia. He was against female infanticide and many other social problems. Most importantly, Muhammad asserted that surrender or submission to one supreme God is the true form of worship. There was no concept of religion those days, even though people had various beliefs. People only had a concept called 'deen' which meant 'the way of life'. Muhammad asserted that Islam or surrender to God is the right way of life or deen.

Islam stands on five pillars which basically is: oneness of God and submission to God; 5 prayers a day which has different postures just like yoga, a way to convey submission and also to focus one's attention; fasting for a whole month with an attitude of devotion and love; going on a sacred pilgrimage where various devotees from different races and places gather as a symbol of equality and charity to the poor. But Muslims later became too sensitive towards their faith; even though Muhammad improved the status quo of Arabia as per historians, he couldn't improve it completely in his lifetime. So, only Sufi tradition preserved the original teachings more clearly, which the mainstream Islam rejects as heresy.

Jesus also insisted that love towards God and love towards human beings are his two commandments.

So the bottomline is devotion is one of the ways to purify oneself. And a personal God or a personification is required for it; this divine has to be one and not many, so that one can surrender to it. It is the same as prapanna as described in Gita.

Apart from devotion, karma yoga, or doing one's duties without attachment to the fruits of actions, also purifies the mind and develops the four-fold qualifications. Karma yoga is about focusing on the action rather than the result, on the present rather than the future; it teaches to develop love towards one's actions and do the actions with focus and involvement, not with a mind that is daydreaming about the results. Pure Karma yoga produces states of flow quite effortlessly. Other sitting meditations and kundalini yoga also comes under karma yoga.

Four-Fold Qualifications – Sadhana Chatushtaya

So now you may ask; what are the fourfold qualifications that one should develop?

1. Shad-Sampat

Out of those four, let us just see one for now, which is Shad-Sampat or six virtues. So this one among the fourfold qualifications is further divided into six:

Sama: calmness of the mind;

Dama: gaining control over the mind and senses.

Uparati: The tendency to naturally drop certain conditioned behaviors and habits; for example, you may lose interest in certain habits.

Titiksha – forbearance. Not getting too excited in pleasure and ability to withstand suffering.

Sraddha – trust; This is a trust in spiritual path and see it as a working method; this trust naturally develops once you start feeling some changes in your mind and experience.

Samadhana: Resolving all the internal conflicts so that you gain the ability to focus.

The most practical way to go for is to first slowly develop these six virtues; don't give any deadline. The practice has to be taken slowly and gradually so that you also live your social life in the meantime. For example, a person who starts with can first work on forbearance or titiksha. This means that whenever you go through suffering, you should go through it willingly since there is no choice and try to bear the suffering without getting too distressed about it. You can also develop shraddha, or a faith that you would be able to grow spiritually as the time goes by.

Focused attention meditation that involves focusing on an object (like dhyana or shamata) can bring calmness to the mind and develop sama. It will also slowly develop dama or self-control. That is essentially about bringing the wandering mind under control without letting the mind distracted by sense objects. Uparati is something that would happen naturally when other virtues are developed. Samadhana is something you develop last.

2) Vairagya – Non-attachment

The next thing in four-fold qualifications that I am going to explain is vairagya or non-attachment. Many people mistake that non-attachment is renouncing one's possessions. But one can lead a normal worldly life and still develop non-attachment,. This is usually symbolized as a metaphor: one lives like the lotus leaf in water; even though the leaf resides in water, it doesn't get wet or the water doesn't stick to it. Vairagya also refers to a certain state of mind; To understand that we have to learn about a concept called 'hedonic treadmill'.

Hedonic treadmill theory is a psychological theory that states that regardless of the objective outcomes of lives such as success and failure, the experience of life always returns to a base-level happiness. Happiness never increases as time goes by; the base level happiness always remains the same but it keeps us in the hedonic treadmill, chasing for objective outcomes without actually reaching anywhere. This base-level happiness is a limited happiness and one is not satisfied with it. It is only self-realization or the realization of the truth about one's own nature which can make the limited level of happiness to blossom fully, giving an individual the absolute sense of fulfillment and liberation. When one realizes that running on this hedonic treadmill is fruitless and is not interested in the objective outcomes, he has developed vairagya.

Now one may ask, if one chooses to not to be interested in the objective outcomes, won't he stop working or performing? No; this will increase the performance. Because it will actually make the karma yoga to mature. Since you are not interested in objective outcomes, you can be fully devoted to action, while doing your obligatory duties. As I said, flow states are very normal when one is in karma yoga; so actions actually give a sense of enjoyment at this point.

3. Mumuksutva – Desire for liberation

Now you know that self-realization and the liberation that happens because of it while living is the only thing which will give you the absolute fulfilment. So, your concern shifts automatically from worldly desire to the desire for liberation. Your calm mind, non-attachment and the desire for liberation will make you more focused on the practice and also make you qualified to understand what Viveka is. It might have taken a few decades to reach up to this point. But there are exceptions, like people who get vairagya and mumuksutva in a very early age in life.

4. Viveka – Discrimination of the observer and observed.

One need to realize something that is self-evident. You know the existence of anything because you are conscious of it. You know that a tree you see exists because it is a perception perceived by the consciousness. Consciousness is what that knows everything; that knows that this world exists. So, existence of anything is only known by the existence of consciousness. You are also aware of your own thoughts, emotions, subtle mental movements and mood changes as they float as the contents of your consciousness. When you see everything from a totally subjective perspective, you will see that this world itself appears as a perception in your consciousness; it is as if everything is happening within consciousness.

It takes a great deal of objectivity to understand and develop viveka. Usually a human being is too attached to the concept of 'me' or 'self', which gives him a sense of separation from the world. But when you develop non-attachment, it will be very easy to see this concept of little 'me' as an object of consciousness, which only appears to exist because the thoughts flow in the mind in a high speed. Just like a fan which is running in a high speed creates an illusion that there is a circle, the thoughts when moving fast gives a continuity and creates the illusion of self.

But if you take a step back from your thoughts and just observe what they do, sometimes they may slow down and you may be able to silence your mind for a few seconds. In that few seconds, you would just exist as consciousness simply perceiving sense perceptions. You can now see that you are actually consciousness itself, and that the thoughts, emotions, body and everything you perceive in consciousness is not you; But consciousness, which is the true Self, is now identified with the body, mind and many other concepts like one's beliefs, one's nationality, one's religion etc. It mistakes a selective part of what is observed as self. This idea of mistaking the body and mind as one's self is avidya or root ignorance, which is considered as the root cause of all suffering.

Since it is because of consciousness that the world is perceived, consciousness is seen more real than what appears on the consciousness. This consciousness or the pure awareness has no attributes and gives space for the life experience to occur and the perceptions to exist. Whether you are sleeping, dreaming or in a waking state, it is consciousness which pervades all these three!

With this understanding you can inquire everything that happens in your consciousness and see that it is not you; because you as the pure awareness that observes a thought or emotion should be separate from what is observed.

Since you can observe the thought, the thought is not you. This discrimination or clear identification of the observer or the pure awareness (the real you) and the objects of observation (thoughts, emotions, perceptions etc) is viveka.

Now this may raise a question. Doesn't Vedanta say that everything is one and there is no two? Doesn't the discrimination of observer vs observed promote duality? No.. Actually, this discrimination is necessary to remove the attachments and the selective identification of consciousness with body, mind and certain mental concepts related to the egoic self (my beliefs, my religion, my country etc).

The concept of oneness doesn't have to be promoted as a teaching, belief or a philosophy. This is the reason some traditions do not talk about oneness or the absolute Brahman that exists without a second. It may actually confuse people at the earlier stages. Brahman is the same as your real self. Upanishads say **prajnanam Brahman**, which means consciousness is Brahman.

You can imagine your consciousness as a screen and everything that is observed in consciousness as moving pictures on the screen, In a sense, the screen and the pictures are different; but the pictures do not have any independent existence on their own, So the picture part is called as maya and the screen part is brahman. But you need to understand that the screen can exist without picture. The pictures are just modifications of the same reality. You may see thousand men marching in a screen but the screen is one. But until or unless this oneness of Brahman becomes living experience, theoretical understanding of what is Brahman is of no use. When the final realization dawns, both observer and the

observed is realized as one and the same; this is Advaita. If you want to really understand oneness, it has to start with developing sadhana chatushtaya first.

The final stage of Vedantic path involves to be completely established as a witness or awareness; It is called as shakshibhava or nididhyasana. This is the same as mindfulness in Buddhism. It requires just being a witness and passive observer of everything that passes by in consciousness. You just let the mind happens by itself; you neither give force to the thoughts, emotions and subtle movements of mind nor suppress them. You simply let anything arise and pass away in your conscious experience. Your focus is more on silent gaps between thoughts and mental movements. these gaps keep increasing until the observer and observed converges and all the distinctions disappear,

There are many other things taught in Advaita like karma and creation of the universe. But they are not really much important, Understanding karma helps, but many things can be learnt in the later stage. The only thing one can focus on as a starting point is to work on purifying one's mind.

I have explained more about Sadhana chatushtaya here:

An article that you may be interested in: [Pappankulam – A Village of Brahmins and Four Vedas](#)

You can read my book "[The Truth About Spiritual Enlightenment: Bridging Science, Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta](#)" to learn more.

Also read: [Buddhism and Vedanta are the Same – A Detailed Comparison](#)

[Shanmugam P's answer to What's the essence of non-duality?](#)